How Australia's fear of abandonment has driven foreign policy

Australian Financial Review, 2 April 2017
by **Andrew Clark**

As a distinguished member of Australia's foreign policy elite, former intelligence chief Allan Gyngell's professional signature is a measured, at times cautious, approach. But the central message of his new book on the subject is that Australia must cast off the timidity of the past and "have a go".

At a time when the US under Donald Trump appears intent on ripping up international pacts or recasting them on an "America first" basis, China is throwing its recently acquired superpower weight around in the South China Sea, Europe is fragmenting, terrorism is spreading, and globalisation is in retreat, Australia must become more "deeply engaged ... to secure its future," Gyngell writes.

However, in his review of 75 years of Australian foreign policy, dating back to the dark days of World War Two, he concludes that the "motivating force of Australia's international engagement has been fear of abandonment".

"For some that will seem too timid and un-heroic a motivation for a great country's foreign policy."

As a former head of the Foreign Affairs and Trade Department Peter Varghese has put it, Australia has "tended to see power as belonging to others", and "traditionally been more comfortable in the slipstream than in the lead".

Whatever previous merits or drawbacks, this approach has now passed its use-by date. According to Gyngell, "the rules-based order Australia has known from the beginning of its modern history, one in which the rules have mostly been set with its friends and allies [like the US], is also changing".

A new set of choices

So Australia faces "not just a binary choice between Washington and Beijing, but a series of increasingly complex choices involving Japan, India and the ASEAN countries".

Put more simply, we have spent much of the last 75 years avoiding the tough choices – now we must make them.

What gives Gyngell's call for a bolder Australian foreign policy its urgency is not just the current global turmoil – reflected in "inchoate and contradictory statements" by Trump – but the authority he commands.

As a former director-general of Australia's premier intelligence agency, the Office of National Assessments, founding head of the influential Lowy Institute for International Policy, a former senior adviser to Labor prime minister Paul Keating, a onetime senior official in the Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister's departments, and now an adjunct professor at the ANU, Gyngell is well placed to undertake a "tour d'horizon" of Australia's foreign affairs.

In a career spanning almost half a century, he has either advised on, written about, or negotiated over Australia's relationships with the US, China, Japan and Indonesia. He has worked for Liberal and Labor prime ministers including John Gorton, William McMahon, Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke, Paul Keating, John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull, not to mention foreign ministers like Percy Spender, Richard Casey, Paul Hasluck, Gordon Freeth, Don Willesee, Andrew Peacock, Bill Hayden, Gareth Evans, Alexander Downer, Kevin Rudd and Julie Bishop.

Never captured by Canberra

He may be a member of Australia's foreign policy elite, but in manner and demeanour Gyngell has never been captured by it. A modest man, his career shows he has little to be modest about.

Continuing that professional panache, the title of his new book – *Fear of Abandonment* – is well timed. It is published exactly 100 years after US President Woodrow Wilson jettisoned America's neutrality and took the US into World War One, realising his vision of an America-led international order.
It is also appearing as that America-led order has been thrown into doubt. So current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, and his Liberal Party deputy, and Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, are tasked with navigating Australia through rising US-China tensions, alarm over China's partial militarising of the South China Sea, Russian leader Vladimir Putin's influence on elections in America and Europe, Britain's Brexit, and a hydra-headed terrorist monster lorded over by the so-called Islamic State group.

A further reason for undertaking this ambitious project is contained in the opening sentence – a 60-year-old quote from George Kennan, architect of the US Cold War containment policy which provided the frame for a postwar international order for nearly 45 years.

Kennan wrote: "If we plod along with only the feeble lantern of our vision of contemporary events, unaided by history ... the darkness closes in again behind us as we move along, and none can be sure of direction or of pace or of the trueness of action."

To generate some light, Gyngell has written a comprehensive survey of the history of Australian foreign policy. This dates back to 1942, when Japanese forces poured south

along the Malay Peninsula, captured Singapore, invaded Papua New Guinea and threatened Australia.

It was also the year when Labor Prime Minister John Curtin turned to the US for help. This signalled the effective start of Australia's own foreign policy.

Managing our own affairs

Finally, 1942 was the year when the Australian Parliament adopted the Statute of Westminster, formalising Australia's primary role in dealing with foreign policy.

The following 75 years have had their share of drama, from a disastrous attempt to mediate in the 1956 Suez Crisis to Australia's prominent role in the struggle over East Timor's independence to the quagmire of Vietnam to our key contribution to the reconstruction of post-Pol Pot Cambodia.

Through it all there have been apparent sharp changes in direction by succeeding Coalition and Labor governments. But the task of the historian is not just to follow, lamb-like, the tracks of shifting rhetoric, but to unearth and analyse strands of continuity.

On the other hand, there is also an institutional bias among members of the bureaucratic-professional diplomatic class to veer towards continuities rather than schisms because it enhances their place in the narrative as sort of permanent guardians of the "true" Australian foreign policy.

Gyngell's persuasive contribution to the continuity theme is to argue that Australian foreign policy has been governed by three elements. These are the need to enmesh with a powerful protector, engagement with Asia, and promotion of a rules-based system for regulating relations between nations – largely to ensure the strong don't bully the weak.

Within this foreign policy troika there have been significant shifts in emphasis, and even greater changes in rhetoric.

Partisan priorities

Labor governments have tended to broaden the parameters of the US alliance and emphasise engagement with Asia and multilateralism. Liberal-National Party governments have placed more emphasis on the US alliance, ditto for bilateral relations, and less on multilateralism. The tone and posture of the current Malcolm Turnbull-led Coalition government tends to muddy the waters between both positions.

There is no more stark illustration of this historic difference than over Australia's relations with the US. On the Liberal side there was Robert Menzies' reference to "great

and powerful friends", Harold Holt's "All the way with LBJ" over Australia siding with the US in the Vietnam War and Gorton's "We'll go a Waltzing Matilda with you" on the same issue.

A few years after Gorton's comments the new, Gough Whitlam-led, Labor government's incoming Trade Minister, Jim Cairns, called the renewed US bombing of Hanoi "the most brutal indiscriminate slaughter of women and children in living memory", incoming Labour Minister Clyde Cameron described the US administration as "maniacs" and incoming Urban and Regional Development Minister Tom Uren called them mass murderers.

But the ANZUS Alliance, Australia's defence bedrock since its signing by the Menzies Liberal government in 1951, continued.

It is not just ANZUS, but on Vietnam, Korea, the Gulf Wars, Afghanistan, the Middle East, East Timor, China, Japan, Indonesia, India, ASEAN, Europe, postwar institutions like the UN, IMF, World Bank and GATT (later the WTO); climate change, trade, the GFC, international investment flows, and other issues, that Gyngell's knowledge and intimate understanding of the issues and personalities drive some compelling narratives.

Sir Percy Spender

The benefits of this background, a clear intellect, understanding of human nature, and sense of irony, come to the fore in his pen portraits of key figures in the passing parade of three quarters of a century of Australian foreign policy making.

Writing about Sir Percy Spender, the postwar Menzies government's first foreign minister – the title then was the clunky, ambivalent "Minister for External Affairs" – Gyngell describes him as "ambitious, quick-witted and highly competitive".

Spender held the position for just 16 months, but in that time he secured the ANZUS Treaty, outfoxed Menzies in cabinet over the initial decision to send Australian soldiers to the Korean War, and launched the Colombo Plan for hosting Asian students in Australia. He was, according to Gyngell, "one of the most consequent of all Australian Foreign Ministers".

Spender's successor, the manorial Casey, who was a governor of Bengal, had impressive intuitive gifts but was bruised by cabinet clinches. Casey understood the hopeless position Britain had run into over its plans to retake control of the Suez Canal from Egypt in 1956, and also had inklings of the tragedy of America's coming intervention in Vietnam, which was strongly backed by the Menzies government.

Prefers written communication

More than a decade before the US committed half a million ground troops to the conflict, Casey wrote in his diary: "A prominent Frenchman said to me a year ago that there was no military solution to [the] Indo-China problem but that the only solution was a political one ... I tend to believe it is largely true."

His successor, the highly credentialed Hasluck, was, according to Gyngell, "an unsuccessful minister" – one who "preferred written communication to engaging in debate," and his "approach to ministerial responsibility was so rigid that he would not tell his own department what his advice had been to cabinet".

A significant shift came with the election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972. Labor recognised China, withdrew all Australia's remaining military assets in Vietnam, cancelled conscription, banned sporting tours by racially selected teams and announced the end of the White Australia Policy.

Whitlam "wanted to make a mark on the world, and his overseas travel was frequent and indulgent". While the 70s "were, in many ways, a sour and anxious time for Australian foreign policy, they ushered in" – under Whitlam, and his Liberal Party successor, Malcolm Fraser – "elements of a foreign policy that would be recognisably Australian".

"The Whitlam Government had made changes that were urgently needed and Fraser maintained most of them, although the bitterness of the domestic political debate" after the forced dismissal of the Whitlam government by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr "obscured the degree of continuity at the time".

Creative foreign policy

A critical inflection point was 1982, the last year of the Fraser government. It was the year the Campbell Committee of Inquiry into the financial system, commissioned by then treasurer John Howard, produced its final report; Soviet boss Leonid Brezhnev died; martial law was declared in Poland; Asian migration to Australia grew rapidly; market-driven Chinese economic growth took off; and digitisation catapulted global financial flows.

The incoming Hawke Labor government largely implemented the Campbell recommendations for opening up the Australian economy, Brezhnev's death led to the installation of reformer Mikhail Gorbachev, martial law in Poland was the last hurrah for communist control of the Eastern Bloc, and Asian migration is now literally transforming the face of Australia.

Conflating these events, Australia's role and influence in the world grew as its economy opened up and Chinese demand generated a local mining investment boom. Living

standards rose by more than a half as the country enjoyed a quarter of a century of uninterrupted growth.

During the post 1982 generation, Australian influence in the world increased. Foreign policy took on a more creative hue, with the Australia-encouraged formation of APEC, the Cairns group of agricultural exporting countries, and the G20. All secured an Australian seat at the global table.

Gyngell's book is impressively thorough about the past, but offers no real road map for the coming years. He may argue there is little point because of the unforeseeable nature of what former UK prime minister Harold McMillan referred to as "events, dear boy, events".

But is he also, in foreign policy terms, being a little "timid and un-heroic"?

Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World Since 1942, by Allan Gyngell. La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc.